# THE FIGHTER

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(Continued.)

"Send for your best, sharpest reporter," resumed Caleb. "Give him an outline of this case against old Shevlin. Tell him to spread himself on it. As a starter, tell him Shevlin an' me used to be friends, an' suggest that he'd better chase around here first of all an' interview me, to find out if I ever heard of the graft trick that was worked on those two public buildin's. I never let reporters get in here; but I'll make an exception in this case, 'cause he'll bring a per'nal note from my pers'nal friend, Amzi Nicholas Caine, Esquire. I'll talk to him kind of guarded-like. But pretty soon I'll get rattled under his questions, an' let out enough to put him on the right track. Then when I see he's s'picious, I'll give in an' tell him the whole thing, an' exonerae ol' Shevlin to beat the band. That reporter'll feel like the man who went out for squirrels an' brought home a bear. Then, when he reports back to you, I want you should be firm in your dooty to the c'moonity. You must decide that pers'nal friendship can't stand in the way of the public's sacred right to find out things that's none of their business. Print the whole terr'ble trooth. Don't spare me. But see that you clear Shevlin's name till it shines like it had a Sat'dy night bath. An' Dey— ain't—to—be—mentioned? Understand?"

"Perfectly," answered Caine. "And I'll do nothing of the sort."

"D'ye mean you—?"

"I mean just this: You are the most conscienceless, inhuman brute I ever met; but I have a sort of morbid liking for you. Besides, as you so often take graceful occasion to remind me, I am in your debt for certain financial favors. Also, I have some regard for the truth of what appears in my own newspaper. For all those reasons—and for several more—I'm not going to help you to commit social suicide, nor to stamp yourself as more of a highwayman that you really are. Is that plain?"

"So plain that it's plumb ugly," replied Caleb. "But you'll do it just the same. If it ain't the Star, it'll be one of the other papers. That story's goin' to be in print by to-morrow mornin'. You speak 'bout likin' me an' bein' in my debt. The best way you can show that likin' an' gratitood is by doin' as I ask now. The Star's the best paper in Granite an' it's read by the best people. Don't you s'pose I'd rather have folks get their first idee of the story from such a paper as that to have 'em see it plastered all over the front page of some screechin' sheet, in letters two feet high?"

"But," argued Caine. "What sense is there in doing it at all?"

"From a grown man's point of view," admitted Caleb, "There ain't a mite of sense in it. It's straight craziness. But if you think I'm goin' to let Dey go around knowin' the trooth about her old crook of a father who she worships, you're wrong. She thinks he was a measly saint with a tin halo. An' she gets pleasure out of thinkin' it. An' she's goin' to go right on thinkin' it to the end of the game. What sort of a yellow dog would I be to let her hear things about him that'd make her cry an' that would sure break her heart? There's another thing: She's got into a good crowd now. She goes to folk's houses an' has a good time there. Who's goin' to invite a crook's daughter to their house? Or, do you think she'd go to such places, knowin' how they thought of her father? Not her. She'd die first. Why, ev'ry time folks looked at her in the street, she'd be thinkin' to herself: 'It ain't because I'm so pretty an' cause my eyes look like two chunks of heaven, an' cause when I smile at you it makes you feel as if someone had lent you money.' She'd think: They're pointin' me out as the daughter of Shevlin who stole cash from the city!' No, no, son! She ain't going to have none of those things happen to her. Not while Caleb Conover's on deck. Butterfly smashin' ain't in my line. That's why I say you've got to help me. An' you'll do it, too."

"Of course you know," suggested Caine, "that this will ruin those weird social ambitions of yours?"

"I know nothin' of the sort. Even if I did, I s'pose I'd have it to do just the same. But it won't. I'm too well off to go to jail, or to have folks say: 'Get out!' when I say 'Let me in!' There'll be a sight of talk in the papers an' all through the State. But folks get tired talkin', after awhile. An' I never get tired risin'. So I'll win out. When I flash on 'em that merger of the Up-State R. R. with my C. G. & X., they'll see I'm too big a man to be sat on. That's comin' off next week by the way. An' bigger schemes to foller. Oh, folks won't be sore on me long! So you see it ain't such a great stunt of heroism I'm doin' for the little girl after all. Now you'd better start. For we—"

"But Miss Shevlin? She will read what the papers are bound to say of you. She will hear what her friend—"

"Yes," ruefully admitted the Fighter, "She will. I'll have to take my chances on that. If she drops me, why it's better'n if s'ciety dropped her. Better for ev'ry body concerned. Unless maybe for me. How's Miss Standish?"

"Quite well, thank you. She—"

"I've been meanin' to come 'round and pay that dinner call. But I've been pretty busy. An' Dey says there's no great hurry."

"Just now," answered Caine, remembering Letty's moist appeal, "The Standish household is a little upset. I'd call sometime later, if I were you. They will understand. Clive Standish is down with mumps, poor little chap."

"There's only two kind of kids," philosophized Conover. "Bad ones and sick ones. But I ain't afraid of catchin' anything. I'll be 'round there in a day or two, tell her."

"By the way," remarked Caine, to change the subject he found vaguely distasteful, "Miss Shevlin tells me she has been invited to spend the summer at the Hawarden's cottage at the Antlers."

"Yes," returned Caleb, drily, "Kind of Mrs. Hawarden, wasn't it? Dey's as pleased as a small boy with a revolver. She's been crazy to go to the Adirondacks. I never knew she wanted to till last week, or—"

"And Mrs. Hawarden providentially invited her the next day?" put in Caine, his mouth-corners twitching.

"That's right," assented Caleb, "I guess some big-hearted philanthrofist just took such a fancy to Mrs. Hawarden as to pay the whole fam'ly's board bill there for the season;—on condition she asked Dey. But keep that to yourself; for maybe it's just a wrong guess. An' I wouldn't have Dey know it for a thousand dollars. Now go an' send that reporter here."

"I wonder," mused Caine, as he departed on his queer mission, "what Caleb Conover would be if all the rest of the world were like Desiree Shevlin. It's more interesting, though," he added, "to conjecture what he would be like without Desiree Shevlin. Where would he stop, if she were out of his life?"

CHAPTER XVI.
Desiree Makes Plans.

Next morning, the Granite Star made known to the world at large that grievous wrong had been done to the city and to its taxpayers when their two foremost public buildings had been erected. These edifices, hitherto the pride of Granite, were constructed of cheap, inferior material: were ill-put together and were, in short, a disgrace, a byword and a hissing. The city and county had paid for first-class work. They had received fourth-rate value for their money.

And the miscreant on whom the sole and total blame rested was Caleb Conover, President of the revivified C. G. & X. railroad. He, hiding behind the honorable name of a man since dead, had robbed the city with one hand and the county with the other. Now, through the cleverness of a Star reporter, his culpability was at last unearthed.

Further, the Star desired, editorially, to avoid needless exploitation of scandal and the bringing to light of misdemeanors for which there now appeared to be no legal penalty. But it owed a duty to its constituents, the thinking class of Granite. Perhaps Mr. Conover, having since the regrettable transactions, reared upon such fraudulent foundations a fortune which was estimated as verging upon the two million mark, would see his way toward making restitution.

To which quip of Caine's the Fighter retaliated by depressing Steeloid stock. This bit of practical repartee led to a second editorial to the effect that what was done was done, and that perhaps the wisest and most dignified course would be to let the unfortunate matter rest where it was. The lesser newspapers of the town, havin- bayed with incredibale loudness and ferocity the moment the Star gave voice, now showed inclination to follow the leader's example in letting the scandal die out.

There were no further developments in the case to warrant continuous rehashing of the story through their columns. Ex-Governor Parkman, finding himself and his crusade unceremoniously side tracked by this more interesting turn affairs had taken, sulked in his tent. Caleb, after that first momentous interview, would see no reporter. A new sensation was thoughtfully provided by the assistant cashier of the Aaron Burr National Bank who wandered one day from his post of duty and neglected to return; taking with him, in equal absent-mindedness $18,000 of the bank's funds.

Caleb and his inspired confession, for all these excellent reasons, were not even a nine-day wonder. Within a week the volcano had subsided. The incident, apparently, was closed. Whether or not the Grand Jury would take steps toward criminal prosecution remained to be seen.

At the end of the week. Caleb, in answer to a pre-emptory summons, called on Desiree.

"Where have you been?" she catechised with the air of an Angora kitten enacting the role of Rhadamanthus.

"I've been busy," he evaded, "Workin' on a new deal we're puttin' through, an'—"

"Do you know it is eight whole days since you have been near me?" she demanded.

"Nine," he corrected humbly. "I—I been busy, an'—"

"And you haven't called anywhere else?"

"Where else could I?" he asked in amaze. "There's only one place I expected to call. That's at the Standish-es'. An' they've got mumps there. Besides, I kind of thought I'd wait until someof this noospaper talk quieted down before I went anywheres. That's —that's why I didn't come here, either," he went on, shamefacedly.

"I knew it!" she declared. "I knew that was it. I wondered if you could be so utterly silly. So I waited. And it seems you could. Aren't you ashamed? It would have served you right if I hadn't sent for you at all. Why didn't you come, Caleb? You surely don't suppose all that newspaper nonsense made any difference to me, do you? Now stop looking at me as if I'd slapped you and promise not to be so bad any more. Promise!"

"Look here!" blurted Caleb, at once relieved and puzzled, "How was I to know you wouldn't just about hate me when you heard how I'd acted about those measly public buildin's? An' your father's comp'ny too. Why, I—"

"You don't mean to say you thought I believed any of the absurd story?" she cried, incredulous. "Why, Caleb Conover, I—"

"It was true!" he protested vehemently. "All of it was true It was me, an' not your father that—"

"It was neither of you, if there was anything wrong about the matter," she decided with calm finality. "I don't know business and I don't know politics. But I do know you and I knew Dad. And neither of you could have done a low or dishonest thing if you had tried all day. If the papers choose to twist your business dealings upside down and try to make people think either of you defrauded anybody,—why, so much the worse for people who are stupid enough to believe such falsehoods. That's all there is about it. I've seen cartoons of you garroting the city of Granite, and I've read editorials that called you 'Brute' Conover and I've waded through columns of articles abusing you. And it all made me angry enough to cry. But not at you, you old chum of mine. At the people who wrote such vile things and tried to make the public believe them. Now let's talk about me. Are you glad I'm going away? Please be."

"Am I glad I'm not goin' to see you for more'n two months?" corrected Caleb. "Not much I'm not. It gives me the blues ev'ry time I think of it."

"But you are going to see me. I've thought it all out, and I've got your orders ready for you."

"You don't mean to say you're not goin'?" queried Caleb in dismay. "But you've got to, Dey. Just think how much you've wanted to, an'—"

"Oh, I'm going," she replied serenely. "I've promised Mrs. Hawarden. And, besides, I wouldn't miss it for worlds. But you're coming, too. Isn't that nice?"

She leaned back to watch his delight in her revelation. But he eyed her without a ray of understanding.

"I mean," she explained, "you're going to take a nice, long vacation in August or September and coming up to the Antlers. I talked it over with Jack Hawarden and it's all arranged. There won't be room for you in the cottage, but you can get a tent or a lodge within a stone's throw of it; and we'll have the gloriousest time you ever dreamed of. Isn't that splendid? Say it is!"

"But Dey," he objected. "You don't understand. I never took a vacation in my life. I ain't got time to. This is goin' to be the busiest summer yet, for me. I've a dozen irons in the fire. I'd like awful well to come an' see you there, but—"

"I've settled it all," she replied calmly. "And you're coming. It will only be two weeks;—if you can't get away for longer. But you're coming for those two weeks."

(To be Continued.)